

Community of Ethics

A note on Commitment and the civil servant

When my daughter was posted as Director Tea Board in Dubai, we got some quality time to spend with her. She drove us around all the sheikhdoms of UAE in her Mazda. Once when she was taking us to one of the malls outside Dubai town, she stopped at a traffic light on a crossing. There was hardly any traffic on Dubai roads at that time. She planned to go straight and therefore, she kept the car in the central lane. Suddenly I saw that the mall was situated on the right turn. There was no car in sight anywhere. So I asked her to take the right turn, which is free in UAE. She refused saying, 'No Papa, I am committed.' Once having made the decision to go straight, she was committed - even if nobody was watching.

We often say that we are committed to do what's right. We say that we are committed to complete a particular project within stipulated time. Each one of us says he/she is committed to something worthwhile. Some emancipated intellectuals among the civil servants declare that they are committed to higher values like Liberalism, Secularism, justice and Human Rights.

"I don't think that as a participant in life you cannot be committed. You either commit to mediocrity or commit to greatness," says Les Brown.

I believe that actually, most of us are committed to mediocrity. Almost every young entrant to the civil service starts his career with a sense of commitment to serve the people, but after about ten years is mainly interested in the monthly paycheque.

Barring exceptions, commitment to higher values is largely missing in the civil servants. It is perhaps ingrained in the culture and ethos of our civil service that they do what they are told to do, not what their heart is committed to. Or in other words, they are committed to do what is dished out to them. Some bureaucrats have reached great heights by showing their willingness to be committed to their political bosses.

What is colloquially termed as 'politically committed' of a section of bureaucrats is actually a fake commitment. It is another name for subservience with a selfish motive

or simply opportunism. It does tend to become a habit with lapse of time. For example, there is a reasonably large group of former civil servants who reaped rich benefits during a certain political regime, and therefore have resorted to condemn everything a new ruling dispensation does in the name of liberalism, secularism, human rights and humanism. They did not see anything worth criticising during the earlier regime.

There is yet another band of civil servants who keep shifting their 'commitment' from one political side to another. They are the 'rice soldiers'. The case of a distinguished bureaucrat changing his loyalties from one chief minister to two others belonging to different parties is well known. The beauty of his success is that each boss was equally happy with him.

There some people for whom commitment is a joke. They can be committed to one thing one day and the next day shift their commitment to something else. It is easy for them to switch their commitment from one partner to another, one philosophy to another, one friend to another. They get enchanted by different things.

There are some others who are afraid to make a commitment, because commitment may have a price. They don't know what is going to happen. They are not sure that they can take the plunge because they don't know what is on the other side. They are afraid to jump off the diving board.

As I said, barring exceptions, commitment is missing in civil servants. Here, we will talk about the exceptions. For them, commitment to their job is a mindset.

There is a subtle difference between passion and commitment. Passion is something you say you have always wanted to do. Commitment means staying dedicated to what you said you were going to do long after the you have forgotten why did you say it.

Jeremy Aldana says, 'Seems to me that there is a fine line between insanity and dedication... I call that line commitment'.

In every aspect of life, if something is worth doing, it's worth giving 100% of your effort to it. A 99% commitment is not going to see it through. You see, there is no gray area when it comes to commitment. Either you are fully committed or you are not.

But a person who is only 99% committed leaves open a window—however small—for their convictions to falter. And, given enough time, the convictions of someone who isn't 100% committed almost always do falter.

The big question is whether one should be committed to something. There is a philosophy which says that one should flow with the current, not try to block it by being fixed in commitment. On the contrary, according to the ontological theory of leadership, you can forget about being a leader if you are not committed to something bigger than yourself.

Commitment making is commonly regarded as an effective way to promote positive behaviours. The general idea is that when people commit to certain behaviour, they adhere to their commitment, and this produces long-term behaviour change.

The idea of commitment appears very attractive. But the big questions regarding commitment are whether commitment is effective; and if so, why is it effective.

A commitment in psychological terms means to enforce a change in behaviour from the normal. On New Year day, we make resolutions to be healthier by eating healthy food and regular exercising, or give up the pleasure of smoking. This involves changing our behaviour by adopting a positive habit.

Most of the time, the period of acting according to the 'commitment' is quite short. But some of us stay with the resolution made on New Year day. It is easier to make one decision, and stay consistent to it; than it is to make a new decision every single time we are presented with a problem. From an evolutionary standpoint, behavioural consistency also serves us well: in a social environment, unpredictable people are less likely to be liked. Not only will people go out of their way to behave consistently; they will also feel positively about being consistent with their decision. Once we have made a choice or taken a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment. Those pressures will cause us to respond in ways that justify our earlier decision.

To take advantage of behavioural consistency, you should make an initial commitment to an activity you want to engage in. The initial commitment you propose to make has to be low stake and easy to make.

Commitment and consistency are powerful motivators to increase engagement and persuade us to fulfil our goals. Designs which allow us to make a small, low-cost commitment will be more likely to be effective than ones that make commitment a costly process. An all-or-nothing design will deliver nothing from most of us.

In life there are three types of commitment.

The first type of commitment is an exciting activity; a venture, voyage, adventure, exploit, project, or an undertaking.

In this sense, you commit to something for the sheer thrill of it. This type marks those who travel the world and are able to scale a mountain. This type of commitment is important; because it helps you experience a broad array of opportunities life has to offer.

Example-As a child, Prasanth Nair saw the behaviour of various government functionaries and was impressed by the behaviour of an IAS officer. He resolved to become an IAS officer. It was a commitment he made with himself.

The second level of commitment is a season.

You commit to something for an extended period of time, even after the initial thrill wanes. You plant seeds and stick around long enough to see them grow. But this is all temporary. After the time of the commitment is complete, you move on to other endeavours. The season is over; the commitment is finished.

Prasanth resolved to do something good for the district of Kozhikode. For two years he was the Collector, he initiated and worked resolutely for Compassionate Kozhikode. The commitment was finished when he left Kozhikode.

The third type of commitment is for keeps. It is a permanent obsession.

This is the highest mark of maturity and what marks enduring dedication. Love is forever, and so are some commitments. Although jobs come and go, your belief, your life's work, should be something that sticks. Something you can commit to.

Prasanth is committed to the Talisman of Mahatma Gandhi. Wherever he may be, he is guided by the 'most powerful instrument of administration'.

The biggest commitment for Prasanth is the commitment of compassion.

Jeff Goins says that depending on where you are in life, it may be the time to make a commitment. Any time is the right time to commit; to a job, a relationship, a path; something; anything. We don't need your restlessness or your excitement. What we need is a little more conviction in our difference-makers. We need your focus, your pluck, your courage

Commitment has its advantages:

It helps you to see something that is bigger than you

It reminds you that you matter

It gives you an opportunity to be conscious and not do things unconsciously

It gives you a chance to belong to a community

I will end with a personal note. I have been writing a monograph on Ethics of Public Service for two years. Thoughts of the book have consumed me during these weeks and months, but I am making little progress. Now that I realize the 100% rule about being committed, I have decided to finish it in a month's time.

It is yet to be seen whether I meet the commitment.